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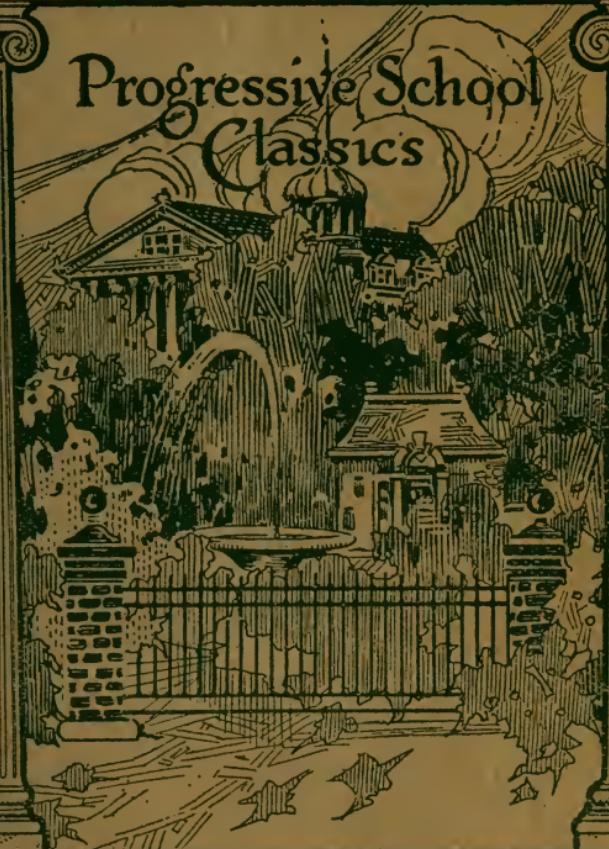
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# THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL AND OTHER POEMS

By JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

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Progressive School Classics

THE  
VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL  
AND OTHER POEMS

BY  
JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

With a Biographical Sketch  
Portrait and Notes



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## JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL—poet, essayist, and scholar—was born at Cambridge, Massachusetts, February 22, 1819. His birthplace was then a quiet, peaceful village, made beautiful by the majestic trees that shaded its streets, and with real country close at hand.



Thus he grew up among almost rural surroundings, and learned early to appreciate the beauty about him; most of his poems and many of his essays reflect the love of nature which seems to have been strong in him from childhood. His schooldays over, he entered Harvard, then a small college slightly over a mile from Elmwood, his father's estate. After his graduation Lowell studied law, but though he received a degree he never practiced. At Harvard he had written verses and contributed articles and essays to the college magazine, of which he was editor, and before he had even begun to build up a practice he abandoned the law and devoted

himself to literature. In 1844 he married Miss Maria White, who was herself a poet, and who, until her death in 1853, was the greatest inspiration to him in his work.

Lowell's first volume of poems, "A Year's Life," appeared in 1841. This collection was, on the whole, decidedly inferior to his productions of the following seven years, and in 1848 he published the first series of his "Biglow Papers," "A Fable for Critics" and "Sir Launfal." His prose writings of that period and later comprise essays on literature, history, and politics.

In 1855 he was made Professor of Modern Languages at Harvard College. Two years later he married Miss Frances Dunlap. Lowell was by this time recognized as a poet of true genius, a writer of fine prose, and an eminent scholar. For two years he was the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* and for ten an associate editor of *The North American Review*.

In 1877 he undertook a new kind of work, accepting the appointment of United States Minister to Spain, and in 1880 he was transferred from Madrid to London, where he remained as our representative until 1885. The remaining six years he spent at his home, Elmwood, where in 1891 he died. In Westminster Abbey a bust of Lowell and a memorial window bear witness to the high regard in which he was held in England; for in that country, as in our own, his death was mourned by a large circle of warm personal friends as well as by those who knew him only through his writings.

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no.

## THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

### PRELUDE TO PART FIRST

OVER his keys the musing organist,  
Beginning doubtfully and far away,  
First lets his fingers wander as they list,  
And builds a bridge from Dreamland for his lay :  
Then, as the touch of his loved instrument 5  
Gives hope and fervor, nearer draws his theme,  
First guessed by faint auroral flushes sent  
Along the wavering vista of his dream.

---

Not only around our infancy  
Doth heaven with all its splendors lie ; 10  
Daily, with souls that eringe and plot,  
We Sinais climb and know it not.

Over our manhood bend the skies ;  
Against our fallen and traitor lives  
The great winds utter prophecies ; 15  
With our faint hearts the mountain strives ;  
Its arms outstretched, the druid wood  
Waits with its benedicite ;  
And to our age's drowsy blood  
Still shouts the inspiring sea. 20

Earth gets its price for what Earth gives us ;  
The beggar is taxed for a corner to die in,  
The priest hath his fee who comes and shrives us,  
We bargain for the graves we lie in ;  
At the devil's booth are all things sold, 25

Each ounce of dross costs its ounce of gold;

For a cap and bells our lives we pay,  
Bubbles we buy with a whole soul's tasking:

'T is heaven alone that is given away,

30 'T is only God may be had for the asking;  
No price is set on the lavish summer;  
June may be had by the poorest comer.

And what is so rare as a day in June?

Then, if ever, come perfect days;

35 Then Heaven tries earth if it be in tune,  
And over it softly her warm ear lays;  
Whether we look, or whether we listen,  
We hear life murmur, or see it glisten;  
Every clod feels a stir of might,

40 An instinct within it that reaches and towers,  
And, groping blindly above it for light,  
Climbs to a soul in grass and flowers;  
The flush of life may well be seen  
Thrilling back over hills and valleys;

45 The cowslip startles in meadows green,  
The buttercup catches the sun in its chalice,  
And there's never a leaf nor a blade too mean  
To be some happy creature's palace;  
The little bird sits at his door in the sun,

50 Atilt like a blossom among the leaves,  
And lets his illumined being o'errun  
With the deluge of summer it receives;  
His mate feels the eggs beneath her wings,  
And the heart in her dumb breast flutters and sings;  
55 He sings to the wide world, and she to her nest,—  
In the nice ear of Nature which song is the best?

Now is the high-tide of the year,

And whatever of life hath ebbed away

Comes flooding back with a rippy cheer,  
 Into every bare inlet and creek and bay; 60  
 Now the heart is so full that a drop overfills it,  
 We are happy now because God wills it;  
 No matter how barren the past may have been,  
 'T is enough for us now that the leaves are green;  
 We sit in the warm shade and feel right well 65  
 How the sap creeps up and the blossoms swell;  
 We may shut our eyes, but we cannot help knowing  
 That skies are clear and grass is growing;  
 The breeze comes whispering in our ear,  
 That dandelions are blossoming near, 70  
 That maize has sprouted, that streams are flowing,  
 That the river is bluer than the sky,  
 That the robin is plastering his house hard by;  
 And if the breeze kept the good news back,  
 For other couriers we should not lack; 75  
 We could guess it all by yon heifer's lowing,—  
 And hark! how clear bold chanticleer,  
 Warmed with the new wine of the year,  
 Tells all in his lusty crowing!  
  
 Joy comes, grief goes, we know not how; 80  
 Everything is happy now,  
 Everything is upward striving;  
 'T is as easy now for the heart to be true  
 As for grass to be green or skies to be blue,—  
 'T is the natural way of living: 85  
 Who knows whither the clouds have fled?  
 In the unscarred heaven they leave no wake;  
 And the eyes forget the tears they have shed,  
 The heart forgets its sorrow and ache;  
 The soul partakes the season's youth, 90  
 And the sulphurous rifts of passion and woe

Lie deep 'neath a silence pure and smooth,  
 Like burnt-out craters healed with snow.  
 What wonder if Sir Launfal now  
 95 Remembered the keeping of his vow?

## PART FIRST

## I

"My golden spurs now bring to me,  
 And bring to me my richest mail,  
 For to-morrow I go over land and sea  
 In search of the Holy Grail;  
 100 Shall never a bed for me be spread,  
 Nor shall a pillow be under my head,  
 Till I begin my vow to keep;  
 Here on the rushes will I sleep,  
 And perchance there may come a vision true  
 105 Ere day create the world anew."

Slowly Sir Launfal's eyes grew dim,  
 Slumber fell like a cloud on him,  
 And into his soul the vision flew.

## II

The crows flapped over by twos and threes,  
 110 In the pool drowsed the cattle up to their knees,  
 The little birds sang as if it were  
 The one day of summer in all the year,  
 And the very leaves seemed to sing on the trees:  
 The castle alone in the landscape lay  
 115 Like an outpost of winter, dull and gray:  
 'T was the proudest hall in the North Countree,  
 And never its gates might opened be,  
 Save to lord or lady of high degree;  
 Summer besieged it on every side,  
 120 But the churlish stone her assaults defied;

She could not scale the chilly wall,  
 Though around it for leagues her pavilions tall  
 Stretched left and right,  
 Over the hills and out of sight;  
 Green and broad was every tent,  
 And out of each a murmur went  
 Till the breeze fell off at night.

125

## III

The drawbridge dropped with a surly clang,  
 And through the dark arch a charger sprang,  
 Bearing Sir Launfal, the maiden knight,  
 In his gilded mail, that flamed so bright  
 It seemed the dark castle had gathered all  
 Those shafts the fierce sun had shot over its wall

130

In his siege of three hundred summers long,  
 And, binding them all in one blazing sheaf,

135

Had cast them forth: so, young and strong,  
 And lightsome as a locust-leaf,  
 Sir Launfal flashed forth in his maiden mail,  
 To seek in all climes for the Holy Grail.

## IV

It was morning on hill and stream and tree,  
 And morning in the young knight's heart;  
 Only the castle moodily  
 Rebuffed the gifts of the sunshine free,

140

And gloomed by itself apart;  
 The season brimmed all other things up  
 Full as the rain fills the pitcher-plant's cup.

## V

As Sir Launfal made morn through the darksome  
 gate,  
 He was 'ware of a leper, crouched by the same,

145

Who begged with his hand and moaned as he sate;  
 150 And a loathing over Sir Launfal came;  
 The sunshine went out of his soul with a thrill,  
 The flesh 'neath his armor 'gan shrink and crawl,  
 And midway its leap his heart stood still  
 Like a frozen waterfall;  
 155 For this man, so foul and bent of stature,  
 Rasped harshly against his dainty nature,  
 And seemed the one blot on the summer morn,—  
 So he tossed him a piece of gold in scorn.

## VI

The leper raised not the gold from the dust:  
 160 "Better to me the poor man's crust,  
 Better the blessing of the poor,  
 Though I turn me empty from his door;  
 That is no true alms which the hand can hold;  
 He gives only the worthless gold  
 165 Who gives from a sense of duty;  
 But he who gives but a slender mite,  
 And gives to that which is out of sight,  
 That thread of the all-sustaining Beauty  
 Which runs through all and doth all unite,—  
 170 The hand cannot clasp the whole of his alms,  
 The heart outstretches its eager palms,  
 For a god goes with it and makes it store  
 To the soul that was starving in darkness before."

## PRELUDE TO PART SECOND

DOWN swept the chill wind from the mountain peak,  
 175 From the snow five thousand summers old;  
 On open wold and hilltop bleak  
 It had gathered all the cold,

And whirled it like sleet on the wanderer's cheek;  
It carried a shiver everywhere

From the unleafed boughs and pastures bare; 180

The little brook heard it and built a roof

'Neath which he could house him, winter-proof;

All night by the white stars' frosty gleams

He groined his arches and matched his beams;

Slender and clear were his crystal spars 185

As the lashes of light that trim the stars;

He sculptured every summer delight

In his halls and chambers out of sight;

Sometimes his tinkling waters slipt

Down through a frost-leaved forest-crypt, 190

Long, sparkling aisles of steel-stemmed trees

Bending to counterfeit a breeze;

Sometimes the roof no fretwork knew

But silvery mosses that downward grew;

Sometimes it was carved in sharp relief 195

With quaint arabesques of iee-fern leaf;

Sometimes it was simply smooth and clear

For the gladness of heaven to shine through, and  
here

He had caught the nodding bulrush-tops

And hung them thickly with diamond-drops, 200

That crystalled the beams of moon and sun,

And made a star of every one:

No mortal builder's most rare device

Could match this winter-palace of iee;

'T was as if every image that mirrored lay 205

In his depths serene through the summer day,

Each fleeting shadow of earth and sky,

Lest the happy model should be lost,

Had been mimicked in fairy masonry

By the elfin builders of the frost. 210

Within the hall are song and laughter,

The cheeks of Christmas grow red and jolly,  
And sprouting is every corbel and rafter

With lightsome green of ivy and holly;

215 Through the deep gulf of the chimney wide  
Wallows the Yule-log's roaring tide;  
The broad flame-pennons droop and flap

And belly and tug as a flag in the wind;

Like a locust shrills the imprisoned sap,

220 Hunted to death in its galleries blind;  
And swift little troops of silent sparks,

Now pausing, now scattering away as in fear,  
Go threading the soot-forest's tangled darks

Like herds of startled deer.

225 But the wind without was eager and sharp,  
Of Sir Launfal's gray hair it makes a harp,  
And rattles and wrings  
The icy strings,

Singing, in dreary monotone,

230 A Christmas carol of its own,  
Whose burden still, as he might guess,  
Was "Shelterless, shelterless, shelterless!"

The voice of the seneschal flared like a torch  
As he shouted the wanderer away from the porch,  
235 And he sat in the gateway and saw all night

The great hall-fire, so cheery and bold,

Through the window-slits of the castle old,

Build out its piers of ruddy light  
Against the drift of the cold.

## PART SECOND

## I

THERE was never a leaf on bush or tree, 240

The bare boughs rattled shudderingly;

The river was dumb and could not speak,

For the weaver Winter its shroud had spun;

A single crow on the tree-top bleak

From his shining feathers shed off the cold sun; 245

Again it was morning, but shrunk and cold,

As if her veins were sapless and old,

And she rose up decrepitly

For a last dim look at earth and sea.

## II

Sir Launfal turned from his own hard gate, 250

For another heir in his earldom sate;

An old, bent man, worn out and frail,

He came back from seeking the Holy Grail;

Little he recked of his earldom's loss,

No more on his surcoat was blazoned the cross, 255

But deep in his soul the sign he wore,

The badge of the suffering and the poor.

## III

Sir Launfal's raiment thin and spare

Was idle mail 'gainst the barbèd air,

For it was just at the Christmas time; 260

So he mused, as he sat, of a sunnier clime,

And sought for a shelter from cold and snow

In the light and warmth of long-ago;

He sees the snake-like caravan crawl

O'er the edge of the desert, black and small, 265

Then nearer and nearer, till, one by one,

He can count the camels in the sun,

As over the red-hot sands they pass  
 To where, in its slender necklace of grass,  
 270 The little spring laughed and leapt in the shade,  
 And with its own self like an infant played,  
 And waved its signal of palms.

## IV

“For Christ’s sweet sake, I beg an alms”;—  
 The happy camels may reach the spring,  
 275 But Sir Launfal sees only the grawsome thing,  
 The leper, lank as the rain-blanchèd bone,  
 That cowers beside him, a thing as lone  
 And white as the ice-isles of Northern seas  
 In the desolate horror of his disease.

## V

280 And Sir Launfal said, “I behold in thee  
 An image of Him who died on the tree;  
 Thou also hast had thy crown of thorns,  
 Thou also hast had the world’s buffets and scorns,  
 And to thy life were not denied  
 285 The wounds in the hands and feet and side:  
 Mild Mary’s Son, acknowledge me;  
 Behold, through him, I give to thee!”

## VI

Then the soul of the leper stood up in his eyes  
 And looked at Sir Launfal, and straightway he  
 290 Remembered in what a haughtier guise  
 He had flung an alms to leprosie,  
 When he girt his young life up in gilded mail  
 And set forth in search of the Holy Grail.  
 The heart within him was ashes and dust;  
 295 He parted in twain his single crust,  
 He broke the ice on the streamlet’s brink,

And gave the leper to eat and drink :  
 'T was a mouldy crust of coarse brown bread,  
 'T was water out of a wooden bowl,—  
 Yet with fine wheaten bread was the leper fed,      300  
 And 't was red wine he drank with his thirsty soul.

## VII

As Sir Launfal mused with a downcast face,  
 A light shone round about the place ;  
 The leper no longer crouched at his side,  
 But stood before him glorified,      305  
 Shining and tall and fair and straight  
 As the pillar that stood by the Beautiful Gate,—  
 Himself the Gate whereby men can  
 Enter the temple of God in Man.

## VIII

His words were shed softer than leaves from the pine, 310  
 And they fell on Sir Launfal as snows on the brine,  
 Which mingle their softness and quiet in one  
 With the shaggy unrest they float down upon ;  
 And the voice that was softer than silence said,  
 "Lo, it is I, be not afraid !      315  
 In many climes, without avail,  
 Thou hast spent thy life for the Holy Grail ;  
 Behold, it is here,—this cup which thou  
 Didst fill at the streamlet for me but now ;  
 This crust is my body broken for thee      320  
 This water His blood that died on the tree ;  
 The Holy Supper is kept, indeed,  
 In whatso we share with another's need :  
 Not what we give, but what we share,—  
 For the gift without the giver is bare ;      325  
 Who gives himself with his alms feeds three,—  
 Himself, his hungering neighbor, and me."

## IX

Sir Launfal awoke as from a swound :  
 "The Grail in my castle here is found !  
 330 Hang my idle armor up on the wall,  
 Let it be the spider's banquet-hall ;  
 He must be fenced with stronger mail  
 Who would seek and find the Holy Grail."

## X

The castle gate stands open now,  
 335 And the wanderer is welcome to the hall  
 As the hangbird is to the elm-tree bough ;  
 No longer scowl the turrets tall,  
 The Summer's long siege at last is o'er ;  
 When the first poor outcast went in at the door,  
 340 She entered with him in disguise,  
 And mastered the fortress by surprise ;  
 There is no spot she loves so well on ground,  
 She lingers and smiles there the whole year round ;  
 The meanest serf on Sir Launfal's land  
 345 Has hall and bower at his command ;  
 And there 's no poor man in the North Countree  
 But is lord of the earldom as much as he.

## THE BOBOLINK

ANACREON of the meadow,  
 Drunk with the joy of spring !  
 Beneath the tall pine's voiceful shadow  
 I lie and drink thy jargoning ;  
 5 My soul is full with melodies,  
 One drop would overflow it,  
 And send the tears into mine eyes,  
 But what carest thou to know it ?

Thy heart is free as mountain air,  
And of thy lays thou hast no care,  
Scattering them gayly everywhere,  
Happy, unconscious poet!

10

Upon a tuft of meadow grass,  
While thy loved one tends the nest,  
Thou swayest as the breezes pass,  
Unburdening thine o'erfull breast  
Of the crowded songs that fill it,  
Just as joy may choose to will it.  
Lord of thy love and liberty,  
The blithest bird of merry May,  
Thou turnest thy bright eyes on me,  
That say as plain as eye can say,—  
“Here sit we, here in the summer weather,  
I and my modest mate together;  
Whatever your wise thoughts may be,  
Under that gloomy old pine-tree,  
We do not value them a feather.”

15

20

25

30

35

40

Now, leaving earth and me behind,  
Thou beatest up against the wind,  
Or, floating slowly down before it,  
Above thy grass-hid nest thou flutterest  
And thy bridal love-song utterest,  
Raining showers of music o'er it,  
Weary never, still thou trillest  
Spring-gladsome lays,  
As of moss-rimmed water-brooks  
Murmuring through pebbly nooks  
In quiet summer days.  
My heart with happiness thou fillest,  
I seem again to be a boy

Watching thee, gay, blithsome lover,  
O'er the bending grass-tops hover,  
Quivering thy wings for joy.

There 's something in the apple-blossom,

45 The greening grass and bobolink's song,  
That wakes again within my bosom  
Feelings which have slumbered long.  
As long, long years ago I wandered,  
I seem to wander even yet.

50 The hours the idle schoolboy squandered,  
The man would die ere he 'd forget.  
O hours that frosty eld deemed wasted,  
Nodding his gray head toward my books,  
I dearer prize the lore I tasted

55 With you, among the trees and brooks,  
Than all that I have gained since then  
From learnèd books or study-withered men !  
Nature, thy soul was one with mine,  
And, as a sister by a younger brother

60 Is loved, each flowing to the other,  
Such love for me was thine.

Or wert thou not more like a loving mother  
With sympathy and loving power to heal,  
Against whose heart my throbbing head I 'd lay

65 And moan my childish sorrows all away,  
Till calm and holiness would o'er me steal ?  
Was not the golden sunset a dear friend ?  
Found I no kindness in the silent moon,

70 And the green trees, whose tops did sway and bend,  
Low singing evermore their pleasant tune ?  
Felt I no heart in dim and solemn woods,—  
No loved one's voice in lonely solitudes ?  
Yes, yes ! unhoodwinked then my spirit's eyes,  
Blind leaders had not taught me to be wise.

Dear hours! which now again I overlive,  
 Hearing and seeing with the ears and eyes  
 Of childhood, ye were bees, that to the hive  
 Of my young heart came laden with rich prize,  
 Gathered in fields and woods and sunny dells, to be  
 My spirit's food in days more wintery. 75

Yea, yet again ye come! ye come!  
 And, like a child once more at home  
 After long sojourning in alien climes,  
 I lie upon my mother's breast,  
 Feeling the blessedness of rest, 80  
 And dwelling in the light of other times.

O ye whose living is not-*Life*,  
 Whose dying is but death,  
 Song, empty toil and petty strife,  
 Rounded with loss of breath!  
 Go, look on Nature's countenance,  
 Drink in the blessings of her glance;  
 Look on the sunset, hear the wind,  
 The cataract, the awful thunder;  
 Go, worship by the sea; 90  
 Then, and then only shall ye find,  
 With ever-growing wonder,  
 Man is not all in all to ye;  
 Go with a meek and humble soul,  
 Then shall the scales of self unroll  
 From off your eyes—the weary packs  
 Drop from your heavy-laden backs;  
 And ye shall see, 100  
 With reverent and hopeful eyes,  
 Glowing with new-born energies,  
 How great a thing it is to BE!

75

80

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90

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100

105

## RHŒCUS

God sends his teachers unto every age,  
To every clime, and every race of men,  
With revelations fitted to their growth  
And shape of mind, nor gives the realm of Truth  
5 Into the selfish rule of one sole race :  
Therefore each form of worship that hath swayed  
The life of man, and given it to grasp  
The master-key of knowledge, reverence,  
Infolds some germs of goodness and of right ;  
10 Else never had the eager soul, which loathes  
The slothful down of pampered ignorance,  
Found in it even a moment's fitful rest.

There is an instinct in the human heart  
Which makes that all the fables it hath coined,  
15 To justify the reign if its belief  
And strengthen it by beauty's right divine,  
Veil in their inner cells a mystic gift,  
Which, like the hazel twig, in faithful hands,  
Points surely to the hidden springs of truth.  
20 For, as in nature naught is made in vain,  
But all things have within their hull of use  
A wisdom and a meaning which may speak  
Of spiritual secrets to the ear  
Of spirit ; so, in whatsoe'er the heart  
25 Hath fashioned for a solace to itself,  
To make its inspirations suit its creed,  
And from the niggard hands of falsehood wring  
Its needful food of truth, there ever is  
A sympathy with Nature, which reveals,  
30 Not less than her own works, pure gleams of light

And earnest parables of inward lore.  
 Hear now this fairy legend of old Greece,  
 As full of gracious youth, and beauty still  
 As the immortal freshness of that grace  
 Carved for all ages on some Attic frieze.

35

A youth named Rhœcus, wandering in the wood,  
 Saw an old oak just trembling to its fall,  
 And, feeling pity of so fair a tree,  
 He propped its gray trunk with admiring care,  
 And with a thoughtless footstep loitered on. 40  
 But, as he turned, he heard a voice behind  
 That murmured "Rhœcus!" 'T was as if the leaves,  
 Stirred by a passing breath, had murmured it,  
 And, while he paused bewildered, yet again  
 It murmured "Rhœcus!" softer than a breeze. 45

He started and beheld with dizzy eyes  
 What seemed the substance of a happy dream  
 Stand there before him, spreading a warm glow  
 Within the green glooms of the shadowy oak.  
 It seemed a woman's shape, yet far too fair 50  
 To be a woman, and with eyes too meek  
 For any that were wont to mate with gods.  
 All naked like a goddess stood she there,  
 And like a goddess all too beautiful  
 To feel the guilt-born earthliness of shame. 55

"Rhœcus, I am the Dryad of this tree,"  
 Thus she began, dropping her low-toned words  
 Serene, and full, and clear, as drops of dew,  
 "And with it I am doomed to live and die;  
 The rain and sunshine are my caterers, 60  
 Nor have I other bliss than simple life;  
 Now ask me what thou wilt, that I can give,  
 And with a thankful joy it shall be thine."

50

55

60

Then Rhœcus, with a flutter at the heart,  
 65 Yet, by the prompting of such beauty, bold,  
 Answered: "What is there that can satisfy  
 The endless craving of the soul but love?  
 Give me thy love, or but the hope of that  
 Which must be evermore my nature's goal."

70 After a little pause she said again,  
 But with a glimpse of sadness in her tone,  
 "I give it, Rhœcus, though a perilous gift;  
 An hour before the sunset meet me here."  
 And straightway there was nothing he could see  
 75 But the green glooms beneath the shadowy oak,  
 And not a sound came to his straining ears  
 But the low trickling rustle of the leaves,  
 And far away upon an emerald slope  
 The falter of an idle shepherd's pipe.

80 Now, in those days of simpleness and faith,  
 Men did not think that happy things were dreams  
 Because they overstepped the narrow bourn  
 Of likelihood, but reverently deemed  
 Nothing too wondrous or too beautiful  
 85 To be the guerdon of a daring heart.  
 So Rhœcus made no doubt that he was blest,  
 And all along unto the city's gate  
 Earth seemed to spring beneath him as he walked,  
 The clear, broad sky looked bluer than its wont,  
 90 And he could scarce believe he had not wings,  
 Such sunshine seemed to glitter through his veins  
 Instead of blood, so light he felt and strange.

Young Rhœcus had a faithful heart enough,  
 But one that in the present dwelt too much,  
 95 And, taking with blithe welcome whatso'er

Chance gave of joy, was wholly bound in that,  
 Like the contented peasant of a vale,  
 Deemed it the world, and never looked beyond.  
 So, haply meeting in the afternoon  
 Some comrades who were playing at the dice, 100  
 He joined them, and forgot all else beside.

The dice were rattling at the merriest,  
 And Rhœcus, who had met but sorry luck,  
 Just laughed in triumph at a happy throw,  
 When through the room there hummed a yellow bee 105  
 That buzzed about his ear with down-dropped legs  
 As if to light. And Rhœcus laughed and said,  
 Feeling how red and flushed he was with loss,  
 "By Venus! does he take me for a rose?"  
 And brushed him off with rough, impatient hand. 110  
 But still the bee came back, and thrice again  
 Rhœcus did beat him off with growing wrath.  
 Then through the window flew the wounded bee,  
 And Rhœcus, tracking him with angry eyes,  
 Saw a sharp mountain-peak of Thessaly 115  
 Against the red disk of the setting sun,—  
 And instantly the blood sank from his heart,  
 As if its very walls had caved away.  
 Without a word he turned, and, rushing forth,  
 Ran madly through the city and the gate, 120  
 And o'er the plain, which now the wood's long  
 shade,  
 By the low sun thrown forward broad and dim,  
 Darkened wellnigh unto the city's wall.

Quite spent and out of breath he reached the tree,  
 And, listening fearfully, he heard once more 125  
 The low voice murmur "Rhœcus!" close at hand:  
 Whereat he looked around him, but could see

Naught but the deepening glooms beneath the oak.  
 Then sighed the voice, "O Rhœcus! nevermore  
 130 Shalt thou behold me or by day or night,  
 Me, who would fain have blessed thee with a love  
 More ripe and bounteous than ever yet  
 Filled up with nectar any mortal heart:  
 But thou didst scorn my humble messenger,  
 135 And sent'st him back to me with bruised wings.  
 We spirits only show to gentle eyes,  
 We ever ask an undivided love,  
 And he who scorns the least of Nature's works  
 Is thenceforth exiled and shut out from all.  
 140 Farewell! for thou canst never see me more."

Then Rhœcus beat his breast, and groaned aloud,  
 And cried, "Be pitiful! forgive me yet  
 This once, and I shall never need it more!"  
 "Alas!" the voice returned, "'t is thou art blind,  
 145 Not I unmerciful; I can forgive,  
 But have no skill to heal thy spirit's eyes;  
 Only the soul hath power o'er itself."  
 With that again there murmured "Nevermore!"  
 And Rhœcus after heard no other sound,  
 150 Except the rattling of the oak's crisp leaves.  
 Like the long surf upon a distant shore,  
 Raking the sea-worn pebbles up and down.  
 The night had gathered round him: o'er the plain  
 The city sparkled with its thousand lights,  
 155 And sounds of revel fell upon his ear  
 Harshly and like a curse; above, the sky,  
 With all its bright sublimity of stars,  
 Deepened, and on his forehead smote the breeze:  
 Beauty was all around him and delight,  
 160 But from that eve he was alone on earth.

## TO THE DANDELION

DEAR common flower, that grow'st beside the way,  
Fringing the dusty road with harmless gold,

First pledge of blithesome May,  
Which children pluck, and, full of pride uphold,  
High-hearted buccaneers, o'erjoyed that they 5  
An Eldorado in the grass have found,  
Which not the rich earth's ample round  
May match in wealth, thou art more dear to me  
Than all the prouder summer-blooms may be.

Gold such as thine ne'er drew the Spanish prow 10  
Through the primeval hush of Indian seas,

Nor wrinkled the lean brow  
Of age, to rob the lover's heart of ease;  
'T is the Spring's largess, which she scatters now  
To rich and poor alike, with lavish hand, 15  
Though most hearts never understand  
To take it at God's value, but pass by  
The offered wealth with unrewarded eye.

Thou art my tropics and mine Italy;  
To look at thee unlocks a warmer clime; 20

The eyes thou givest me  
Are in the heart, and heed not space or time:  
Not in mid June the golden-cuirassed bee

Feels a more summer-like warm ravishment

In the white lily's breezy tent, 25  
His fragrant Sybaris, than I, when first  
From the dark green thy yellow circles burst.

Then think I of deep shadows on the grass,  
Of meadows where in sun the cattle graze,

Where, as the breezes pass,

The gleaming rushes lean a thousand ways,  
Of leaves that slumber in a cloudy mass,  
Or whiten in the wind, of waters blue

That from the distance sparkle through

35 Some woodland gap, and of a sky above,  
Where one white cloud like a stray lamb doth move.

My childhood's earliest thoughts are linked with  
thee;

The sight of thee calls back the robin's song,

Who, from the dark old tree

40 Beside the door, sang clearly all day long,

And I, secure in childish piety,

Listened as if I heard an angel sing

With news from heaven, which he could bring

Fresh every day to my untainted ears,

45 When birds and flowers and I were happy peers.

How like a prodigal doth nature seem,  
When thou, for all thy gold, so common art!

Thou teachest me to deem-

More sacredly of every human heart,

50 Since each reflects in joy its scanty gleam

Of heaven, and could some wondrous secret show,

Did we but pay the love we owe,

And with a child's undoubting wisdom look

On all these living pages of God's book.

## THE COURTIN'

God makes sech nights, all white an' still  
 Fur 'z you can look or listen,  
 Moonshine an' snow on field an' hill,  
 All silence an' all glisten.

Zekle crep' up quite unbeknown  
 An' peeked in thru the winder,  
 An' there sot Huldy all alone,  
 'ith no one nigh to hender.

A fireplace filled the room's one side  
 With half a cord o' wood in—  
 There warn't no stoves (tell comfort died)  
 To bake ye to a puddin'.

The wa'nut logs shot sparkles out  
 Towards the pootiest, bless her,  
 An' leetle flames danced all about  
 The chiny on the dresser.

Agin the chimbley crook-necks hung,  
 An' in amongst 'em rusted  
 The ole queen's-arm thet gran'ther Young  
 Fetched back f'om Concord busted.

The very room, coz she was in,  
 Seemed warm f'om floor to ceilin',  
 An' she looked full ez rosy agin  
 Ez the apples she was peelin'.

'T was kin' o' kingdom-come to look  
 On sech a blessed cretur,

5

10

15

20

25

A dogrose blushin' to a brook  
 Ain't modester nor sweeter.

He was six foot o' man, A 1,  
 30 Clear grit an' human natur,  
 None could n't quicker pitch a ton  
 Nor dror a furrer straighter.

He 'd sparked it with full twenty gals,  
 Hed squired 'em, danced 'em, druv 'em,  
 35 Fust this one, an' then thet, by spells—  
 All is, he could n't love 'em.

But 'long o' her his veins 'ould run  
 All crinkly like curled maple,  
 The side she breshed felt full o' sun  
 40 Ez a south slope in Ap'il.

She thought no v'ice hed sech a swing  
 Ez hisn in the choir;  
 My! when he made Ole Hunderd ring,  
 She *knowed* the Lord was nigher!

45 An' she 'd blush scarlit, right in prayer,  
 When her new meetin'-bunnet  
 Felt somehow thru its crown a pair  
 O' blue eyes sot upon it.

Thet night, I tell ye, she looked *some!*  
 50 She seemed to 've gut a new soul,  
 For she felt sartin-sure he 'd come,  
 Down to her very shoe-sole.

She heered a foot, an' *knowed* it tu,  
 A-raspin' on the scraper,—

All ways to once her feelin's flew  
Like sparks in burnt-up paper.

55

He kin' o' l'itered on the mat,  
Some doubtfle o' the sekle,  
His heart kep' goin' pity-pat,  
But hern went pity-Zekle.

60

An' yit she gin her cheer a jerk  
Ez though she wished him furder,  
An' on her apples kep' to work,  
Parin' away like murder.

"You want to see my Pa, I s'pose?"

65

"Wall . . . no . . . I come dasignin' "—  
"To see my Ma? She 's sprinklin' clo'es  
Agin to-morrer's i'nin'."

To say why gals acts so or so,  
Or don't, 'ould be presumin';  
Mebby to mean *yes* an' say *no*  
Comes nateral to women.

70

He stood a spell on one foot fust,  
Then stood a spell on t' other,  
An' on which one he felt the wust  
He could n't ha' told ye nuther.

75

Says he, "I 'd better call agin";  
Says she, "Think likely, Mister":  
Thet last word pricked him like a pin,  
An' . . . Wal', he up an' kist her.

80

When Ma bimeby upon 'em slips,  
Huldy sot pale ez ashes,

All kin' o' smily roun' the lips

An' teary roun' the lashes,

85 For she was jes' the quiet kind

Whose natus never vary,

Like streams thet keep a summer mind

Snowhid in Janooary.

The blood clost roun' her heart felt glued

90 Too tight for all expressin',

Tell mother see how metters stood,

An' gin 'em both her blessin'.

Then her red come back like the tide

Down to the Bay o' Fundy,

95 An' all I know is they was cried

In meetin' come nex' Sunday.

#### NOTES

[The numbers refer to lines in the text.]

#### THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

**Author's note.** "According to the mythology of the Romancers, the San Greal, or Holy Grail, was the cup out of which Jesus Christ partook of the last supper with his disciples. It was brought into England by Joseph of Arimathea, and remained there, an object of pilgrimage and adoration, for many years in the keeping of his lineal descendants. It was incumbent upon those who had charge of it to be chaste in thought, word, and deed; but, one of the keepers having broken this condition, the Holy Grail disappeared. From that time it was a favorite enterprise of the Knights of Arthur's court to go in search of it. Sir Galahad was at last successful in finding it, as may be read in the seventeenth book of the Romance of King Arthur. Tennyson has made Sir Galahad the subject of one of the most exquisite of his poems.

"The plot (if I may give that name to anything so slight) of the following poem is my own, and, to serve its purposes, I

have enlarged the circle of competition in search of the miraculous cup in such a manner as to include not only other persons than the heroes of the Round Table, but also a period of time subsequent to the date of King Arthur's reign."

**1-8.** These lines form a sort of introduction to the Prelude to Part First. Note the way in which each prelude expresses the spirit of that part of the poem it introduces. The first is full of the joyousness of summer—typical of youth and the high hope with which young Sir Launfal sets forth on his quest.

**7. auroral:** resembling the first flush of the dawn, just before sunrise. In Greek mythology Aurora was goddess of the dawn.

**9-10. Not only, etc.** The poet undoubtedly had in mind those lines of Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality" beginning, "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!"

**12. We Sinai's climb.** It was on Mount Sinai (pron. si'ni) that Moses talked with God and received the Commandments. The idea is that many people, because of their smallness of soul, do not know that they are always in the presence of God; they do not appreciate the wonderful works of God about them, nor feel his spirit in their fellow men.

**15. prophecies:** here, inspired teachings.

**17. druid wood.** The Druids were the priests of the Celts in Great Britain. The poet likens the trees to these ancient priests, standing with their arms outstretched in benediction. The figure is especially apt because trees were sacred to the Druids, who performed their religious rites in the forests and groves.

**18. benedicite** (pron. ben-e-dis'e-te): an invocation of God's blessing. (From the Latin *benedicere*, to bless.)

**27. a cap and bells.** The court fool or jester of the Middle Ages wore a costume the coat and high pointed cap of which were adorned with small bells. The poet's meaning here is that we spend our best efforts to obtain useless trifles.

**33. rare:** here, uncommonly fine; to be highly prized.

**35:** if it be. In other words, to see whether or not it is.

**42. Climbs to a soul.** That is, produces something which seems to have a soul.

**56. nice:** here, delicately sensitive, discriminating.

**77. chanticleer** (from the French words *chanter*, to sing, and *clair*, clear): the name given the cock in an ancient French epic entitled "Reynard the Fox." It is now commonly applied to roosters.

**95. his vow.** His vow to find the Holy Grail. (See the poet's note, on p. 28.) Before setting out upon a quest a knight often would sleep upon the hard floor, beside his armor, his head pillow'd upon his shield; and always his hope was to see a vision which would help him in his quest.

**103. rushes.** In medieval dwellings rushes were strewn upon the floor to serve as a carpet.

**108. the vision.** What follows, to the end of line 327, is the vision which was sent in answer to his wish.

**115. outpost:** a post or station situated at some distance

from the army to which it belongs. The "outpost of winter," of course, means the only thing left to remind one of winter, which summer has driven from the land. In the following lines, 119-127, summer is represented as a besieging army, victorious except in the attempt to rout the coldness and gloom of Sir Launfal's castle.

116. **North Countree:** a poetic name given to the North of England.

130. **maiden knight:** a newly made knight who has never taken part in an encounter with an enemy.

138. **maiden:** here, unscarred.

147. **made morn:** made the dark gateway bright with the gorgeousness of his apparel.

163. **no true alms.** To do a good deed is not enough; one must put his heart into the doing of it.

166. **mite.** See the story of the widow's mite, Luke xxi.

167. **that which is out of sight.** That is, to the soul, to God in man.

172. **store:** abundance.

**Prelude.** See note on Prelude to Part First. This winter scene suggests the changed circumstances of the knight who went forth so gayly and proudly on his search for the Holy Grail. He is old and poor and sad; his false pride is quite gone.

174. **mountain peak.** Throughout the poem Lowell describes New England rather than the North Countree.

191. **steel-stemmed trees.** The stems of these ice trees looked, in their shining coldness, like steel.

192. **Bending, etc.** In such a way, that is, as to resemble trees bent by the breeze.

195. **relief:** the sort of sculpture in which the figures stand out from the ground on which they are carved.

196. **arabesques:** fantastic ornaments—in the form of fruits, flowers, foliage, etc.—copied after those used in Moorish architecture.

201. **crystalled:** reflected from its crystal-like surface.

211. **Within the hall.** We suddenly find ourselves in the hall of Sir Launfal's castle.

214. **lightsome:** here, cheerful. Compare this use of the word with that in line 137.

216. **the Yule-log's roaring tide.** The burning of the Yule or Christmas log is an ancient ceremony borrowed from the Scandinavians, who celebrated the feast of Juul with great bonfires. In olden times in England a huge log was burned, at Christmas time, in the big fireplace which warmed the hall of every castle.

219. **shrills:** sings shrilly.

237. **window-slits.** So narrow were the windows of ancient castles that they seemed hardly more than slits in the thick stone walls.

255. **the cross.** On the breast of his surcoat (a long garment worn over the armor) the Christian wore a red cross.

**256.** *sign.* That is, the sign of the cross—symbolic of sorrow and suffering.

**259.** *idle:* here, useless as a protection.

**264.** *He sees, etc.* This (lines 264-272) is a vision within a vision.

**274.** *happy.* Happy, of course, because they are to be refreshed by the waters of the spring.

**278.** *white.* In a certain kind of leprosy a sort of white scale forms on the skin. See Num. XII.10. *Ice-isles:* ice-covered islands.

**281.** *the tree:* the cross on which Christ was crucified.

**282.** *crown of thorns.* See Matt. XXVII.29 and Mark XV.17. What was the leper's crown of thorns?

**283-285.** *buffets and scorns . . . wounds.* See John XX.25-27.

**286.** *Mild Mary's Son.* Sir Launfal invokes the blessing of our Saviour.

**287.** *through him, etc.* See Matt. XXV.40.

**294.** *ashes and dust.* Because of an ancient custom of sprinkling ashes or dust upon the head to show penitence the words are used to denote deep humility.

**305.** *stood before him glorified.* Sir Launfal sees Christ himself in the leper.

**307.** *the Beautiful Gate.* See Acts III.2.

**308.** *Himself the Gate.* See John X.9.

**322.** *Holy Supper:* the Lord's supper, the Communion.

**323.** *In whatso:* in whatever way.

**325.** *the gift, etc.* See line 163.

**329.** *The Grail . . . is found.* How is this true? What does he mean by "stronger mail," in 332?

#### THE BOBOLINK

**1.** *Anacreon* (pron. a-nak're-on): a Greek lyric poet of note, who lived from about 563 B. C. till about 478 B. C.

**52.** *that frosty eld.* The reference is to a rather strict teacher, whose school in Cambridge Lowell attended as a boy.

#### RHŒCUS

**18.** *hazel twig.* A small hazel branch is often used by superstitious people in determining where a well may be successfully dug. Held loosely in the hand, it is supposed to point downward of itself at any spot beneath which water is to be found.

**35.** *Attic:* literally, belonging to Attica, or its capital, Athens, the home of art. The adjective is applied to that in art which is pure and classical.

**36.** *Rhœcus.* Pronounced, re'kus.

**56.** *Dryad.* In Greek and Latin mythology the Dryads were woodland deities who inhabited the forests and groves—wood nymphs.

**99.** *haply:* by chance.

**160.** The poem did not end here, originally, but concluded with

a moral fifty lines in length. It has gained in strength by the poet's omission of this in the later editions of his poems.

### TO THE DANDELION

**6. Eldorado** (originally, in Spanish, *el dorado*, "golden region") : a name applied to an imaginary country, rich in gold, for which adventurers of the sixteenth century, especially Spanish adventurers, were continually seeking. It was supposed to be in the Western Hemisphere, probably in South America.

**26. Sybaris** (pron. *sib'a-ris*) : a Greek city of ancient times, situated in Southern Italy. Its inhabitants were noted for their effeminate and luxurious lives.

**45.** In some editions of Lowell's works there were three stanzas between this line and what is now line 46, and an additional stanza after line 54. The poem, originally published as given here, seems better in its shorter form.

### THE COURTING

This poem is included in "The Biglow Papers," a series of humorous verses written by Lowell in the dialect of the New England farmer of his day. Most of the poems are political satires, and many of them are signed with the name of Hosea Biglow, a fictitious personage supposed to be the son of a Yankee farmer.

- 17. crook-necks:** crooked-necked squashes (hung there to dry).
- 19. queen's-arm:** a sort of musket used in Colonial times.
- 20. Concord.** What fight took place there, and in what year was it fought?
- 33. sparked it:** played the lover.
- 34. Hed squired 'em:** had been escort to them.
- 36. All is:** the whole truth is.
- 37. 'long o' her:** on account of her.
- 40. south slope:** the southern slope of a hill, which receives all the sunshine in the spring.

**43. Ole Hunderd:** Old Hundred or Hundredth—a psalm-tune, first published, probably, about the middle of the sixteenth century. In England the One Hundredth Psalm was sung to it and therefore it was known as "the Hundredth": when it was included in a new version of the psalter "Old" was added to the name to show it had been taken from the older version. Nowadays certain churches sing the Doxology to the old tune.

**58. Some doubtless, etc.:** a little uncertain as to what was to follow.

**94. Bay o' Fundy.** The tides of the Bay of Fundy (which separates Nova Scotia from New Brunswick) are noted for the extraordinary rapidity with which they rise, the waters of the Atlantic seeming fairly to rush into it.

**95. they was cried.** That is, their banns were cried—the fact that they intended to marry each other was announced from the pulpit by the minister.

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